In Search of Rachmaninoff

A poem

by

Valeria Z. Nollan

In Search of Rachmaninoff

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excerpt from this poem, in a different version, first appeared.

Lovelessness, indifference, will never be able to generate
sufficient power to slow down and linger intently
over an object, to hold and sculpt
every detail and particular
in it, however minute.
Only love is capable of being aesthetically productive. . . .

—Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *K filosofii postupka*, 1924
(Toward a philosophy of the act)
tr. Vadim Liapunov

Even with the disaster of living through what has befallen Russia,
where I spent my happiest years, I always feel that my own music
and my reactions to all music remained spiritually the same,
unendingly obedient in trying to create beauty. . . .

Sergei Vasilyevich Rachmaninoff, 1939

Не говорите мне: он умер, он живет,
Пусть жертвенник разбит--огонь еще пылает.
Пусть роза сорвана--она еще цветет.
Пусть арфа сломана--аккорд еще рыдает.

Semyon Nadson, 1886

Song One: Maestoso

Noble spirit,
master of pessimistic grandeur,
where have you gone?
Who will keep us warm this winter?
The blueberry bush hangs its head,
the raspberry bush hangs its head.

A gray eagle has carried you
over the mountains.
Wood nymphs took you
on a silvery wolf
into an enchanted forest.

Can you hear me?
Like Dante's Pilgrim seeking
Beatrice,
I search for you
in a life that requires
your song.

In its nineteenth-century elegance
your tall, lean form
fades in and out of my memory.
It flickers brightly. . . .

I search along St. Petersburg's
crowded streets,
on Nevsky Prospect at the Malyi zal,
and in the Mariinsky concert hall,
dusky jewels of your memories.

I search the Moscow Conservatory,
where your future was ignited
by professors
of the Russian School.

I search among your friends,
Chaliapin, Struve, Medtner,
Siloti,
but they keep their secrets
behind a wall of silence.

Most of all, I search at the piano.
Horowitz, Ashkenazy, Richter,
help me find my way
as I advance,
chord by chord,
measure by measure,
a soldier in battle
seizing the territory
one step at a time.

I listen to *you* play
on recordings from the past.
I store the notes in my mind
like an attentive winemaker
who transforms grapes
into wine,
Galileo's light held together
by moisture.

I stretch my fingers until the bones crack,
make my offering of blood and muscle,
to reach what your hands played:
the elusive interval of the tenth,
the cadenzas, glissandi
up and down the keyboard,
fortissimo alternating with—piano.

I prowl the streets
for my next fix
of Rachmaninoff.

Song Two: Cantabile

Who are you?
Wie kann ich dich kennenlernen?
You say you are 85%
musician
and 15% man,
as ordinary as a birch tree
blowing in the wind.
I would know you
if I could find you.

You would play for me
in a room at twilight,
your fingers on the keyboard
like a troika racing across the plains.
The expansive music is counterpointed
by your restrained movements
and austere presence,
a divide between content and form
that confounded your critics.

In concert you effaced yourself,
letting the music—
the preludes and concerti
and symphonies—
take center stage.
You believed showmanship
was as vulgar
as a second-rate cabaret.

I would watch you
bent like a comma
over the piano,
your fingertips drumming
lightly on your chest.
Notes, phrases, tempi,
entire movements take shape,
inscrutable creative process
that transforms unspoken words
and cherished images
into musical tones.

You would stroll with me
down your favorite rose-lined lane
at Ivanovka
in the morning's quiet.
We could talk about
the sticky-green buds on the trees,
the concert season in Moscow,
and the taste of strawberry jam.
You would give me
the curve of your smile,
and then I would know you.

Willst du mich kennenlernen?
Ich kenne dein Lebenslied,
aber du kennst mich nicht.
Do you know the tenderness I feel
when I stroke the feathers
of a mourning dove
and watch it fly away
into a pinpoint of sunlight?

Do you know that I, too,
speak Russian
and live the betrayal
of emigration?
I, too, love the pealing
of Russian church bells,
that sound denied you
in your adopted country.

. . . . . .

I write poetry about you,
I weave images into words.
I remember everything:
Я помню чудное мгновенье,
передо мной явился ты. . .

Song Three: Vivo

Рассказать ли немного о себе?
Shall I tell you tales of adventure,
like a blond Scheherazade,
to bring you back
every night?
My tales are different.

Child of Stalin's Russia
and Hitler's Germany,
I grew up in the brokenness
of emigration.
In the DP camps near Hamburg
Russians, Ukrainians, Poles
circled each other
with hollow eyes,
hoping for that visa
away from forced repatriation.

We knew hunger—
milk and butter were scarce.
My bones grew soft
from rickets.
Do I suffer now?
My bones are straight and strong.
My hands play Rachmaninoff.

I have learned the secret
of a mysterious island
three kingdoms away.
On that island
whose forests shimmer
green and gold
by a tall oak tree
deep in the ground
in an engraved silver box
wrapped in azure velvet
is the perfect muse
I would present to you.

Her fingers can cure
your headaches,
your private torture.
You can unwrap
the azure cloth
in times of desperation—
you recall that London concert
where a migraine stayed with you
on stage
for two hours?
The audience never knew.

Your Calliope would give you
a cranberry-red potion;
she would grant you entry
to the musical phrases you seek.
On the steppes of Ivanovka
or the streets of Moscow
she would nourish you.
And I would hide behind her eyes.

In New York loneliness drew
a girl with Russian braids
to the piano.
My teacher Mr. Caruso
would sit with me
at that black, hulking form
with its endless keyboard,
and we would forge
harmonious sound
out of an immigrant's confusion.
The piano understood Russian,
or German, or English—
it needed no translator.

I studied with a concert pianist
while my parents were severing
their connections
with each other
and Russia.

My torturers slashed my back
repeatedly
with a serpentine whip,
and cut out my tongue.
They put my body on a rack,
pulling my limbs
to the four stone walls.

My best friends
were the sparrows and pigeons
I brought home,
whose wings I mended.
They transported me
on well-plumed backs
to their avian kingdom
of glittering firebirds.
They lowered me into a nest
of iridescent violet feathers
where I could rest.

True to Tolstoy's nightmares,
you enticed me
into your melodies
and rhythms.
Pianistic architect,
you taught me
your language:
images of a birch forest,
saintly figures on an icon ,
persons remembered
and loved,

or paintings of death
revealed themselves
in musical form.
You said the minor tones suited you;
the bright tones were more difficult.

I carried you
in a procession of the cross
through six years of illness—
arthritis claimed my hands.
The doctors and nurses
at the hospitals where I healed
called me the Rachmaninoff patient.

Pneumonia sufferers gasping,
car accident victims blanketed
in snow-white bandages,
operation survivers pushing IV poles
in the hallways—
in a world sanitized
for living and dying
you reminded me
of beauty.
Your third concerto
was my companion.

Song Four: Lento

You fall into depression,
certain that your creative springs
have run dry.
Your first symphony haunts you:
the Petersburg Orchestra
lost its meaning
and you bolted into the night,
chased by discordant sounds.
They chased you into your darkest self.

You confront the malady
that has imprisoned minds
of writers, painters, musicians
since the times
of Homer and Sappho.
You must summon your muse
from her silver box,
for she makes the springs flow.

Shy around strangers,
you protect yourself
from the winds of Moscow.
The Royal Doors of an Orthodox church
shield the altar from unbelievers.

You fear everything:
rats, snakes, dark attics,
and especially death.
Your heart pounds madly,
a clock ticking off the seconds
until the bomb explodes.
You carry the silver box
more tightly than ever.

The neuralgia in your right temple
is your executioner.
Your hands feel paralyzed,
yet your fingers long for
the keyboard.

Night falls at Ivanovka
and you, with cigarette in hand,
stare into the Russian steppes.
Your journey inward continues,
and your green eyes reveal—
nothing.

Song Five: Agitato

I am Marietta,
poetess and muse of your spirit.
Bakhtin would disagree:
I am not she, I am myself,
unrepeatable, unique.
Jealousy, he says, lies forever
beyond the pale.

Your *Re* drew your eyes
full of bittersweet wisdom
into poetry,
pleading for better verses
to magnify the taut presence
of your songs.

She wrote poetry,
but I play the piano.
Some snakes dislocate their jaws
to swallow a mouse whole:
I extend my hands
to the corners of your chords
as ransom for your music.

I stretch myself
to your measure.

Bakhtin was wrong.
Jealousy wraps itself around me
like a cloak—
Marietta found the path
to your inner sanctum.
You exchanged letters
on poetry and books
and musical compositions.
You said, "Come to the Philharmonia
tonight, we'll be alone,
I'll play for you."

She looked fragile
beside the ebony surface
of the piano's raised lid.
Your glance appreciated
her adoration.
Your fingers moved over the keys
shining black and white
in the dim light
that carved out history
in the darkness.
A single bluish vein stood out
against your right temple.
You played the G minor prelude
and the softer D major.

Would you love
my sunflower hair
and my gypsy eyes
and the red beaded shawl
you would take
from my shoulders?
Would you read
the poems and books
I would send you?
Or would you smile
at my struggle
to master Rachmaninoff?
Perhaps you would ask
my sparrows and pigeons
to take us to their avian kingdom.

. . . . . .

You will never write me a letter,
and I will never hear you play
at the Philharmonia
in St. Petersburg.
We will never walk along the Neva
near the Winter Palace
in contemplation
of the mirrored water.

Your letters to me are—
the notes you wrote down
in Moscow and Ivanovka
and New York,
with the dynamics
that trace the pathways
of your heart.

I am not Marietta,
but I, too, have listened carefully.
I, too, know Rachmaninoff.

Song Six: Allegro vivace

You carry Russia within you.
The Bolshevik machine
of blood and gore
swept up your money
and your farm at Ivanovka.
With only your hands as security,
you escaped through Sweden
to America.

A composer's career yielded
to a concert pianist's touring:
for ten years
you heard no melodies—
your muse was silent.
You lived in translation,
between two worlds,
between two musical styles.
You said,
"I am a ghost wandering
in a world grown alien. . . ."

The American elite embraced you:
you found Horowitz and Ormandy
and Stokowski.
The Philadelphia Orchestra you called
"the best of the best,"
and you tolerated the reporters.
Fluent in three languages,
you learned English slowly;
you wrapped your opinions
in caution and good manners.

But your Russian roots withered,
and the birch tree in America
had to bend with the wind.

Your performances
added dates and places
to the book of your life.
Only Russia was denied you—
Россия, родная —
and you wandered the world,
a rider on a black horse
of nostalgia.

I, too, traverse the boundary,
not Russian, not American,
but something nameless.
My father's Cossack ancestors
called for him to come home,
and he kept his suitcase packed.
He never made it.

My grandmother
lost her piano in Kiev in 1941
along with her daughter.
In Germany my mother
played the piano
in prisoner-of-war camps.
I resurrect their past through
the tangos and preludes
I play on my Mason and Hamlin.
"Tango Notturno,"
"Unter der roten Laterne von St. Pauli . . ."

The piano remembers.
Its undulating bow
provides shelter
for those who would seek it.

Song Seven: Con moto

Lloyd's of London insured your hands,
the graceful golden thread
connecting you with life.
Any damage to those hands
through a fall,
or a poisonous bite—
or a reporter's handshake—
would snap the thread forever.

An Orthodox Russian,
you knew longsuffering:
it resided in your hands.
The public followed you
from city to city,
country to country,
for the spell of your person,
and hands that reached into the piano
to produce the Études-Tableaux
or the Second Concerto.

You needed your audiences
as a traveler needs water;
your art required the presence of others.
Playing in isolation unnerved you,
for it brought loneliness to your door.

Radio you viewed with suspicion—
how could one apprehend music
with one's feet on a chair?
And so you gave the public
your hands at the Steinway

in one thousand live concerts,
a silk ribbon unrolling
in eternal time.

Your hands planted willows
at Ivanovka,
groomed race horses,
and comforted sick children.
But no work was harder
than that at the piano,
your "kind master,"
as you put it.
Your fingers' movements,
sculpting bravura arpeggios and trills
over the keys,
overtaxed those tendons.
The golden thread had to be mended.

Your hands' ache accompanied your life:
sometimes the pain
prevented you from playing
to your standards;
sometimes it almost disappeared,
like faint raindrops
beating on a tin roof.

You feared the bursting
of blood vessels at your fingertips
while in concert.
When that happened
you arpeggiated your chords,
Rachmaninoff's compromise
with fingers made of flesh.

Two minutes were needed
for each finger to recover
from the tiny vascular explosions.
Then the throbbing passed,
and you could endure
the pounding of the chords again.

An electric muff
comforted your hands backstage.
At the piano those hands
never faltered—
your strength of will
was absolute.
But when your hands felt fine
your joy unfolded like
the petals of a rose.

After the playing was over,
after myriad curtain calls
and the request
for the prelude in C sharp minor,
to which you acquiesced,
you could retreat backstage
with your measured step,
fulfilled,
kneading your hands.

Song Eight: Allegretto

Что для тебя самое главное
в жизни?
Что тебя радует?
You would answer,
"I am nothing without God."
Family, friends, travels
revolved like constellations
around your musical search.

And there was Senar. . . .
Christened in honor of devotion—
SErgei and NAtasha Rachmaninoff—
Senar was paradise regained.
It became your Ivanovka in exile,
a place where the horseman could rest.

You planted trees
in stony soil loosened
with your hands,
and Natasha tended the roses.
You watched rabbits in the meadows,
picked mushrooms in the mornings,
and raced your speedboat on the lake.

From Paris and Dresden
friends came—
for the pleasure
of your Russianness,
the lavish meals,
and the music.
After dinner,
humanity's setting
for the waltz of conversation—
about Hitler and war,
America, and music, too—
your guests would retire,
shadows gliding through the house.

You would enter your studio,
close the louvered doors,
and begin to play.
It could be Beethoven, or Chopin,
or Liszt. . . .

Senar healed your hands
in the summers of the '30's.
It returned to you—
composition and contemplation.

It prepared you
for the next concert season,
the perpetuum mobile.

War trampled down reason
and laughed in the face of sanity;
the invasion rolled across the land.
Russia was ravaged.
You offered your loyalty
and your resources
to your homeland:
you financed a tank,
helped the hungry,
sent proceeds from concerts
overseas.

You never learned the outcome.

Song Nine: Grave

You lay in a coma,
your hands moving
as if playing or conducting.
Your doctor understood
that the end of your illness
would be met
by tolling bells.

Your family sacrificed truth
in acts of kindness:
you would get well,
your trees were blooming,
musical scores needed
proofreading.
But you knew.

Dr. Golitsyn
would lift your wrist
to take your pulse,
would look at
the thin hands,
like delicate reeds
growing by water.

When you were conscious
Natasha would read Pushkin.
Morphine helped you
in these last weeks—
you didn't need much,
your body being unused
to its soothing tyranny.

On your last day
a cable arrived from Russia,
announcing a concert
for your seventieth birthday:
"The Union of Soviet Composers
wishes you health . . .
Russia is proud of you."

Your eyes never read these words.

Cancer swallowed you whole.
Like the Erlking,
it took you away in the night.

. . . . . .

They made a gel cast of your hands.

Song Ten: Poco a poco diminuendo

Through the years,
crossing time and space,
languages and cultures,
I have searched for you.

I look everywhere,
strain my ears to hear your voice,
see your tall figure disappearing
just around the corner.
I consider each step I take
on hallowed ground
in St. Petersburg and Moscow.

You are not there;
I walk alone
down the narrow streets.
I chant the words
I have learned
from the *plach*
of my people:
Where have you gone, noble spirit?
Who will keep us warm?
A gray eagle has carried you
over the mountains.

You have inherited peace
in a kingdom
with icons and church bells
and perhaps a piano . . .
ныне и при́сно и во веки веков. . . .

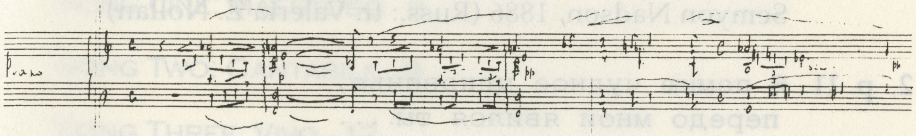
My consolation is your music.
I hear it every day.

. . . . . .

Good night, Sergei Vasilyevich.

* * * *

St. Petersburg
June 2002



Notes

1. p. 4 Don't say to me: He died, he lives.
The altar may be smashed, but the fire still burns.
The rose may be plucked, but it still blooms.
The harp may be broken, but its chord still sings.
Semyon Nadson, 1886 (Russ.: tr. Valeria Z. Nollan)

2. p. 11 Я помню чудное мгновенье,
передо мной явился ты. . . .
Russ.: from Pushkin's poem "K***" (To . . .), 1825
Trans.: I recall that wondrous moment
when you appeared before me.

3. p. 12 Рассказать ли немного о себе?
Russ.: Shall I tell you a little about myself?

4. p. 24 Россия, родная
Russ.: Russia, my dear homeland.

5. p. 30 Что для тебя самое главное в жизни?
Russ.: What is most important to you in life?

6. p. 35 plach/плач
Russ.: ritual lamentations carried out by
village peasants in times of sorrow.

7. p. 35 ныне и присно и во веки веков. . . .
Russ./Church Slavonic: now and ever and to the
ages of ages.

Contents

Song One: Maestoso 6

Song Two: Cantabile 9

Song Three: Vivo 12

Song Four: Lento 17

Song Five: Agitato 19

Song Six: Allegro vivace 23

Song Seven: Con moto 26

Song Eight: Allegretto 30

Song Nine: Grave 33

Song Ten: Poco a poco diminuendo 35

Notes 38

Photo by Baxter Buck for Rhodes College

Valeria Z. Nollan is a specialist in Russian literature and critical theory whose books on Vladimir Soloukhin and Mikhail Bakhtin have been published by Northwestern University Press. She is also a published poet and a trained amateur pianist who has given recitals of Rachmaninoff's music in the U.S., England, and Russia. She is Chair of the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tennessee. She says of her new book: "*In Search of Rachmaninoff* records in poetic form my lifelong connection with Sergei Rachmaninoff's identity. I wrote it in St. Petersburg, Russia, but it had been writing itself for many years. The poem treats themes of Russian emigration, the creative process, and illness and recovery—but most of all it is concerned with the beauty of Rachmaninoff's music and the triumph of his life."

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